Positive Futures - Optimizing Mental Health for Alberta's Children & Youth

A Framework for Action (2006 - 2016)

September 2006

Alberta

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 2

Facing Up to the Challenge 4

Background 5

A Framework for Action 7

- Vision 7
- Beliefs and Principles 7
- Conceptual Model 8
- Strategic Directions 9

Expected Outcomes 10

Activities to Support the Strategic Directions 11

Looking Ahead 13

Glossary 14

References 15

APPENDIX

Key Resources Considered in the Preparation of the Framework 16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alberta is committed to supporting the mental well-being of children, youth, and their families, and to providing effective services for those who are experiencing mental health problems. Children's mental health was identified as a priority in *Advancing the Mental Health Agenda: A Provincial Mental Health Plan for Alberta* (2004) where the need to increase recognition, awareness and understanding of the needs of children and youth with mental illness, and the benefits of effective prevention, early intervention and treatment programs were emphasized. The 10-year strategy *Positive Futures - Optimizing Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth: A Framework for Action (2006-2016)* supports a common and integrated approach to optimizing the mental health of children and youth ages zero to 24 and their families, and to align with the Provincial Mental Health Plan and other strategic government initiatives.

Positive Futures has been adapted from the draft document, *Policy Framework: Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth* (2001) that was developed by the cross-ministerial Children's Mental Health Framework Steering Committee within the context of the Alberta Children and Youth Initiative (ACYI). The policy framework received cross-ministry and cross-regional support in 2001. Vital to the development of the provincial framework was a comprehensive review of background literature and key resources (see Appendix), and a comprehensive provincial consultation with key stakeholders.

The vision of *Positive Futures* is that "Alberta's children and youth will have optimal mental health". Critical components of the framework are the relationships between mental health, mental health problems and mental disorders in children and youth on a continuum from less than optimal mental health to optimal mental health. Optimal mental health for Alberta's children, youth and their families will be achieved through the following three strategic directions:

1. Building capacity to enhance/increase factors that promote mental health and well-being;
2. Removing or reducing risks to well-being and mental health; and
3. Providing support and treatment to children, youth and their families.

Activities to support the three strategic directions include health promotion, prevention, early identification, crisis intervention and stabilization, treatment interventions including both basic and specialized services, community supports, and collaboration supports. Expected outcomes indicating the successful implementation of the framework are as follows:

Building Capacity

- Increased responsiveness of the infrastructure to meet the evolving needs of children, youth and families.
- Increased capacity of individuals, families, communities and governments to recognize and contribute to the mental health of children and youth.

- Increased Albertans' knowledge about the determinants of health (see Glossary) and their role in affecting mental health.
- Increased capacity of partners and stakeholders to collaborate effectively.
- Increased awareness of the factors that build and sustain mental wellness among service providers.

Reducing Risks

- Increased prevention and early intervention strategies for children, youth, families and communities.
- Decreased risk factors that contribute to mental health problems in children, youth and their families.
- Increased knowledge and ability of individuals associated with children and youth to identify and connect those at risk for mental health problems to appropriate resources.
- Increased awareness of individuals, families and caregivers about the warning signs of crisis, escalation of crisis, and the importance of timely intervention for children and youth.

Providing Support and Treatment

- Increased awareness of and access to basic services in order to enable children, youth and their families to obtain services within or close to their own community.
- Availability of specialized services in strategic locations throughout the province to meet mental health needs of children, youth and their families.
- Enhanced range and accessibility of community supports and services for children, youth and their caregivers.
- Increased early identification of children and youth at risk for mental health problems.
- Increased connection to appropriate mental health resources for children, youth, families and communities.

Positive Futures outlines in broad terms what needs to be done to address and optimize the mental health of Alberta's children and youth who will be Alberta's adults in the future. With the implementation of the framework, we are one step closer to the Alberta vision of a "vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children". The next step is to develop a comprehensive implementation plan that includes an accountability framework; performance and outcome measurement and evaluation strategies; linkages to strategic initiatives such as the ACYI, Student Health Initiative and *Healthy Kids Alberta!*; participation from key stakeholders such as the Alberta Mental Health Board (AMHB), Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), other ministries, and the regional health authorities; and priority strategies in areas such as provincial standards for treatment and support, regional service delivery, and provincial and cross-regional mental health initiatives.

FACING UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Alberta is taking action on improving the mental health and wellness of Albertans and moving forward on mental health innovation through the implementation of *Advancing the Mental Health Agenda: A Provincial Mental Health Plan for Alberta* (2004). The Provincial Mental Health Plan identified children's mental health as a priority and stressed the need to increase recognition, awareness and understanding of the needs of children and youth with mental illness, and the benefits of effective prevention, early intervention and treatment programs.

The Alberta government has set a course for the future with a 20-year vision: "A vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children". Implementing strategies that address mental health needs of children, youth and their families will lead to a healthier adult population in the future. Treating mental illness in children, reducing risk, and supporting families and communities will also help to avoid the greater downstream costs resulting from the prevalence of mental illness in children.

Positive Futures - Optimizing Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth: A Framework for Action (2006-2016) is a 10-year strategy that aligns with the *Healthy Kids Alberta! Strategy's* expected outcome that, "more children, youth and their families have strategies, skills and tools to cope successfully with challenges, adjust positively to change, overcome obstacles, resolve problems and experience mental well-being" (p. 3). The framework is action-oriented and is a vital step towards addressing the priorities set forth by the Provincial Mental Health Plan, namely supporting the mental well-being of children and youth, and providing effective services for those children and youth who are experiencing mental health problems. Cross-sector collaboration will be crucial in the implementation of the framework because children's mental health programs across the province are diverse with a multitude of service providers delivering children's mental health services in various locations including schools, community mental health clinics, hospitals, and residential treatment programs.

BACKGROUND

In 2001, a draft provincial policy framework to optimize the mental health of Alberta's children and youth was prepared by a Children's Mental Health Framework Steering Committee within the context of the ACYI to serve as the foundation for strategic planning, investment priorities, and business and implementation planning. This steering committee was chaired by the AMHB, and included representatives from AADAC, Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Children's Services, Alberta Community Development, Alberta Learning, Alberta Aboriginal and Northern Affairs and Alberta Solicitor General. Vital to the development of the provincial framework was a comprehensive review of background literature and key resources (see Appendix). Some trends relating to the mental health of today's children and youth in Canada are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Trends and Risks

Trend...	Risk...
In Canada, the face of depression is getting younger, the average age of onset being 23. The average age of onset is 12 in cases of anxiety disorder and 18 for substance abuse (Wilkerson, 2005).	These numbers and ages of onset are alarming and action needs to be taken to promote and protect the mental health of children and youth.
Suicide is a serious problem in Alberta. In 2004, 440 people residing in Alberta died by suicide, and 73 of these people were 24 years of age or younger (Alberta Vital Statistics - Supplied by the Public Health Surveillance and Environmental Health Branch, AHW). Canada's rate of suicide among adolescents aged 15 to 19 is 13 per 100,000, the third highest suicide rate in the world (Wilkerson, 2005).	For every death by suicide in Alberta, there were nearly six hospitalizations and more than 15 emergency room visits for self-inflicted injuries in one year alone (AMHB, 2005).
Thousands of Albertans are affected by family violence every year and bullying affects many children and youth across the province (Government of Alberta, May 2004).	Family violence and bullying have a negative impact on the mental wellness of children and youth, and can lead to serious mental health problems.
In the 2003-2004 fiscal year, 7,400 per 100,000 children under the age of 18 in Alberta received physician services for a mental health problem or concern. In the 2004-2005 fiscal year, 3,123 per 100,000 children under the age of 18 in Alberta received mental health services in other settings such as regional hospitals and community mental health clinics (AMHB).	These numbers are alarming and action needs to be taken to ensure that service delivery models are evidence–based and leading practice.

In October 2001, the draft provincial policy framework was reviewed by selected stakeholders through focused conversations in Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat and Peace River. Participants were selected by the partnering ministries and included service providers from various sectors including education, health, mental health, addictions, and other community agencies.

Following the provincial consultation, an action plan was developed and an implementation strategy was put forward at the end of 2001. The draft policy framework was accepted as a first step in the development of an integrated approach to mental health for children, youth and their families but was not formally approved as other provincial and national mental health initiatives were underway. The model on optimizing mental health, which includes building capacity, reducing risk, and providing support and treatment, featured prominently in the Provincial Mental Health Plan.

In January 2002, *A Framework for Reform: Report of the Premier's Advisory Council on Health* (Mazankowski Report) was released. It included a recommendation to "Integrate mental health services with the work of regional health authorities" and noted that provincial leadership is required to anticipate the growing needs for mental health services for specific groups including children and adolescents. In April 2003, responsibility for most mental health services transferred from the Alberta Mental Health Board to regional health authorities.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Positive Futures is a 10-year strategy designed to support a common and integrated approach to optimize the mental health of children and youth. For the purpose of this framework, "child" is defined as children from the ages of zero to 12 and "youth" is defined as youth from the ages of 13 to 24, recognizing that young persons from the ages of 18 to 24 face a major transition to adulthood which can be impacted significantly when they suffer from a major mental disorder.

VISION

The vision of *Positive Futures - Optimizing Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth: A Framework for Action (2006-2016)* is:

> "Alberta's children and youth will have optimal mental health."

This vision compliments the Alberta Government's vision of "a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children".

BELIEFS AND PRINCIPLES

The framework is based on the following beliefs and principles:

Beliefs

- Mental health is more than the absence of mental health disorders or freedom from psychiatric symptoms.
- Children, youth and families have strengths and potential.
- Children and youth have unique mental health needs that are different from those of adults.
- Children and youth benefit when they are involved with positive role models.
- The determinants of health (see Glossary) influence the optimal development of children, youth, families and communities.
- Individuals, families, community service providers and governments share responsibility and accountability for achieving optimal mental health.
- The severity and duration of mental health problems are reduced through early identification and intervention.
- Some children and youth are seriously impaired by mental health problems and disorders.
- Children, youth and their families who have mental health disorders or mental health problems should have access to timely and appropriate support and treatment.

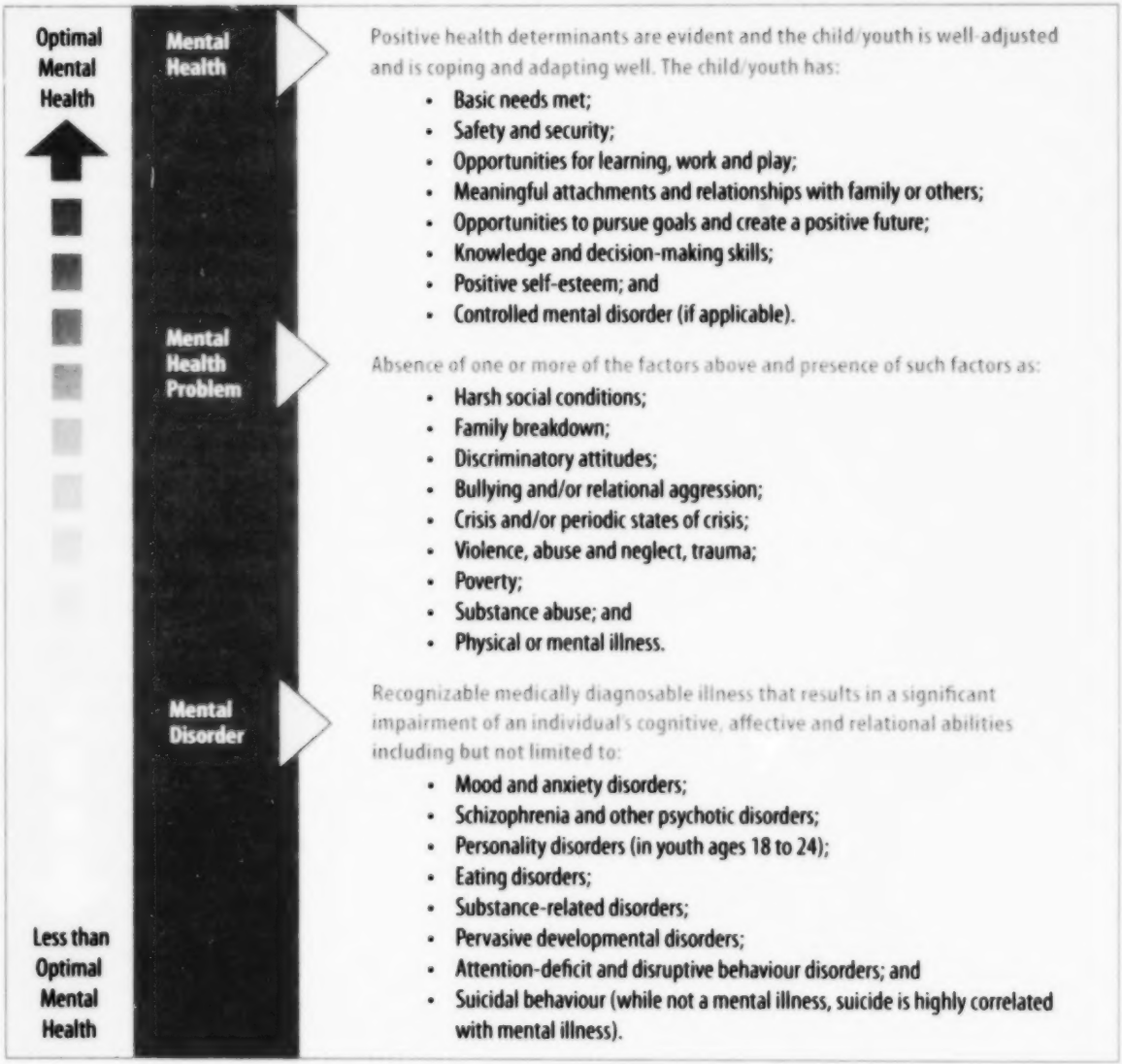
Principles

- The mental health of children and youth will be positively impacted in environments where they are safe, well nourished, stimulated, loved and have opportunities to learn and play.
- Respect for autonomy, dignity, culture, spirituality and diversity of all children, youth and their families shall be demonstrated.
- There is a need for programs and services specifically designed for children and youth to optimize their mental health.
- There is a need for services to be available, accessible and reflect community requirements.
- Optimal mental health for children and youth will be achieved through effective collaborative action based on common goals.
- Children, youth and their families will have opportunities to influence the processes that impact their mental health.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Critical components of *Positive Futures* are the definitions of mental health, mental health problem and mental disorder (see Glossary). The relationships between mental health, mental health problems and mental disorders in children and youth are graphically presented, reflecting movement back and forth along the continuum:

Figure 1. Mental Health Continuum


Optimal Mental Health
Less than Optimal Mental Health
Mental Health
Positive health determinants are evident and the child/youth is well-adjusted and is coping and adapting well. The child/youth has:
• Basic needs met;
• Safety and security;
• Opportunities for learning, work and play;
• Meaningful attachments and relationships with family or others;
• Opportunities to pursue goals and create a positive future;
• Knowledge and decision-making skills;
• Positive self-esteem; and
• Controlled mental disorder (if applicable).
Mental Health Problem
Absence of one or more of the factors above and presence of such factors as:
• Harsh social conditions;
• Family breakdown;
• Discriminatory attitudes;
• Bullying and/or relational aggression;
• Crisis and/or periodic states of crisis;
• Violence, abuse and neglect, trauma;
• Poverty;
• Substance abuse; and
• Physical or mental illness.
Mental Disorder
Recognizable medically diagnosable illness that results in a significant impairment of an individual's cognitive, affective and relational abilities including but not limited to:
• Mood and anxiety disorders;
• Schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders;
• Personality disorders (in youth ages 18 to 24);
• Eating disorders;
• Substance-related disorders;
• Pervasive developmental disorders;
• Attention-deficit and disruptive behaviour disorders; and
• Suicidal behaviour (while not a mental illness, suicide is highly correlated with mental illness).

Mental health for Alberta's children, youth and their families will be achieved through building capacity to enhance/increase factors that promote mental health and well-being; removing or reducing risks to well-being and mental health; and providing support and treatment.

Figure 2. Optimizing Mental Health

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The strategic directions arising out of *Positive Futures* apply to individuals, families, communities and systems. The three strategic directions are:

Building Capacity to Foster Optimal Mental Health

Children, youth, families and communities will benefit from approaches, programs and services that enhance their capacity to experience good mental health and well-being.

Reducing Risks to Optimal Mental Health

Children, youth, families and communities will benefit from approaches, programs and services that eliminate or reduce risk factors associated with mental health problems.

Providing Support and Treatment for Children, Youth and their Families

Children and youth who have mental health disorders or mental health problems, and their families, will benefit from access to appropriate support and treatment.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

When the framework for action is successfully implemented, the following outcomes associated with the three strategic directions are expected:

Building Capacity

- Increased responsiveness of the infrastructure, (e.g., policy, protocols, evaluation, best practices, collaboration, co-location of services, human resource strategies, cross-training, information technology), to meet the evolving needs of children, youth and families.
- Increased capacity of individuals, families, communities and governments to recognize and contribute to the mental health of children and youth.
- Increased Albertans' knowledge about the determinants of health (see Glossary) and their role in affecting mental health.
- Increased capacity (e.g., human and fiscal resources, time, and knowledge of process) of partners and stakeholders to collaborate effectively.
- Increased awareness of the factors that build and sustain mental wellness among service providers.

Reducing Risks

- Increased prevention and early intervention strategies for children, youth, families and communities.
- Decreased risk factors that contribute to mental health problems in children, youth and their families.
- Increased knowledge and ability of individuals associated with children and youth to identify and connect those at risk for mental health problems to appropriate resources.
- Increased awareness of individuals, families and caregivers about the warning signs of crisis, the escalation of crisis, and the importance of timely intervention for children and youth.

Providing Support and Treatment

- Increased awareness of, and access to, basic services in order to enable children, youth and their families to obtain services within or close to their own community.
- Availability of specialized services in strategic locations throughout the province to meet mental health needs of children, youth and their families.
- Enhanced range and accessibility of community supports and services (e.g., respite, interim services, transitional supports) for children, youth and their caregivers.
- Increased early identification of children and youth at risk for mental health problems.
- Increased connection to appropriate mental health resources for children, youth, families and communities.

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT THE STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The following inter-related activities collectively support the strategic directions of building capacity, reducing risks, and providing support and treatment:

- Health Promotion
- Prevention
- Early Identification
- Crisis Intervention and Stabilization
- Treatment Intervention
  - Basic Services
  - Specialized Services
- Community Supports
- Collaboration Supports

Health Promotion

Health promotion includes mental health promotion. It addresses health determinants with the objective of building capacity among children and youth to cope and function well. Health promotion focuses on enhancing factors to protect children and youth against mental health problems or disorders and other health issues.

Specific areas that are the domain of health promotion within this framework will include addressing health determinants to promote mental health. Efforts will include strategies to reduce the stigma associated with mental health disorders and problems, and promoting mental health awareness and mental wellness.

Prevention

Prevention includes activities aimed at children and youth, families, groups and communities in the general population by reducing the impact of risk factors and enhancing protective factors for mental disorders or mental health problems.

Early Identification

Early identification, also called early intervention, includes activities that focus on early detection and screening of children and youth with mental health issues. Depending upon the results of the screen, a child or youth is assessed to determine their unique needs and is connected to the appropriate resources.

Crisis Intervention and Stabilization

Crisis intervention is the timely intervention required to address the special immediate needs of a child or youth who is in intensive emotional distress or in an intensive emotionally disruptive situation.

Stabilization includes activities targeted at restoring the manner in which a child or youth functions after an emotionally disruptive situation.

Treatment Intervention

Treatment intervention is comprised of basic and specialized services provided to children, youth, and their families.

Basic services include referral, assessment and intervention for children and youth who have mental disorders or mental health problems that have affected how they function in major areas of their lives.

Specialized services are specially adapted interventions for children and youth who have mental disorders or mental health problems that have resulted in a significant level of disability and/or have severely affected functioning in the major areas of their lives.

Community Supports

Community supports within this framework include activities that provide for and support basic needs from a mental health perspective. Basic needs include:

- Secure stable living environment;
- Physical and emotional safety;
- Relevant social opportunities;
- Basic social stimulation and recreation;
- Meaningful attachments/relationships; and
- Meaningful activities, i.e., employment, education, leisure, and economic security.

The range of, and need for, community supports will vary depending upon the needs of the child or youth and the characteristics of the community in which they live with their family or caregivers.

Collaboration Supports

Collaboration supports within the framework include approaches and strategies to enable stakeholders to work together effectively to address the needs of children, youth and their families. Transitions between services to address the mental health needs of children and youth must be smooth and barrier-free.

LOOKING AHEAD

Positive Futures - Optimizing Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth: A Framework for Action (2006-2016) outlines in broad terms what needs to be in place to build a stronger mental health system for children, youth and their families. There is no health without mental health and mental health reform is underway in Alberta. Action needs to be taken immediately to address the mental health of children and youth. The framework builds on existing initiatives such as the Student Health Initiative and the *Healthy Kids Alberta! Strategy*. Partnerships are inherent in the framework and include the AMHB, AADAC, other ministries, regional health authorities, child and family services authorities, community agencies, schools, parents and youth.

The next steps in the process include developing an accountability structure and an implementation plan. Priority strategies will be identified to develop provincial standards that support mental health services and programs for children, youth and their families; build regional service delivery models on unique community strengths to meet the basic and specialized service needs of children, youth and families; and recognize the value of provincial cross-regional mental health initiatives. Performance indicators and associated targets, as well as an evaluation framework, will be developed with the implementation of the framework to ensure ongoing measurement and achievement of outcomes. As well, mechanisms to bring together stakeholders to share information and progress, such as regular children's mental health forums held in conjunction with other mental health conferences/showcases in Alberta, will be implemented to sustain the continued action toward the vision and to facilitate successful implementation of the framework.

Alberta's children will be Alberta's adults in the future and with the implementation of the *Positive Futures* framework for action, we are one step closer to the Alberta vision of a "vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children".

GLOSSARY

Capacity	-	the collective resources of individuals and systems (families, groups, communities and organizations) to maximize their potential and cope successfully with daily challenges [1]
Child	-	children from the age of zero to 12
Determinants of health	-	income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy, employment and working conditions, social environments, physical environments, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, biology and genetic endowment, health services, gender and culture [2]
Mental disorder	-	a recognized medically diagnosable illness that results in a significant impairment of an individual's cognitive, affective and relational abilities [3]
Mental health	-	the capacity of the individual, the group and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective well-being, the optimal development and use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective and relational), the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice, and the attainment and preservation of fundamental equality [4]
Mental health problem	-	a disruption in the interactions between the individual, the group and the environment. Such a disruption may result from factors within the individual, including physical or mental illness, or inadequate coping skills. It may also spring from external causes, such as the existence of harsh environmental factors, unjust social structures, or tensions within the family or community [5]
Well-being	-	a balance among physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social health; promoted when individuals can identify and realize their aspirations, satisfy needs, and adapt to changing environments [6]
Youth	-	young persons from the age of 13 to 24, recognizing that young persons from ages 18 to 24 face a major transition to adulthood which can be impacted significantly when they suffer from a major mental disorder

1 The Premiers Council in Support of Alberta Families (1991). *Family policy grid.*

2 Public Health Agency of Canada (2003). *What determines health?* Retrieved from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph- sp/phdd/determinants/index.html#determinants.

3 Health and Welfare, Canada (1988). *Mental health for Canadians: Striking a balance*, p. 8.

4 Ibid, p. 7.

5 Ibid, p. 8.

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APPENDIX

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